**Lawrence Cleary - Interview with Sara Baume**
**Duration: 63.09mins**

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Hi folks we want to get started we don't have much time we only have about an hour to do this so I want to get in as much time as possible with Sara. The way its going to work is that I'll speak for probably, I'll ask her some questions for about thirty-five minutes or so and then I'll open it up to the floor and give you an opportunity to ask Sara questions as well. We have some roving mics and so if you just raise your hand and let us know that you have a question they'll come to you and you can speak to the mic. Its important that you do that because we are recording this, these How I Write Interviews are public interviews they are recorded. The purpose of the interview is that they are somewhat didactic in the sense that we use them as a teaching tool so we put them on our website and we provide transcripts and audio format and also video format. And I do lesson plans to suggest writing prompts that are based on things that Sara will have said to get other people including you could to this for yourself you don't have to do it to somebody else, you can develop your own writing prompts and there are ways of making you think about what you do when you write. This is an interview that's asking Sara about her writing, not what she wrote, but how she did it. The things that she did or does in order to reach her writing goals. So when we open it up to the floor my job at that point will make sure that I direct you to questions about her process, what she does when she writes rather than specifics about some story or her book or anything like that. That will be my job.

For people who don't know Sara just a little bit about her, she was born in Lancashire, she was reared in Cork, I think nine years old when you moved to Cork.

**Sara Baume:**
No, no four months old. I refute the English thing, very tenuous.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
She has a degree in Fine Art at Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design, she did a Masters degree in Creative Writing at Trinity, she has a boyfriend who is also an artist and also an avid fisherman. She has two dogs, a one-eyed terrier named Wink and a larger sand coloured Lurcher named Sadie. Her short story Soul Searcher took the 2014 Davy Byrne's Short Story Award and in 2015 she was the Hennessy Emerging Fiction Writer for her short story Beginning to Dance. And then the 2015 Hennessy new Irish writer award for her debut novel Spill Simmer Falter Wither, which also netted her the Rooney prize for Irish literature awarded to an emerging Irish writer under the age of 40.

I'll just remind you that Sara's books Spill Simmer Falter Wither is our selection for the 2016 UL one-campus one-book initiate and we want to thank Sara for agreeing to submit to an injury into her writing process rather than into her work itself. Okay?

**Sara Baume:**
Cool.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Cheers thank you. All right, I'll begin Sara by asking you if you wouldn't mind maybe characterising your writing process. I ask everybody to do this its like the first thing I ask

people to do is to kind of give a characterisation, is it a painful process, is it a smooth process, is it a fun process? How would you characterise your process?

**Sara Baume:**
Its interesting that painful is the first word you use (laughing)

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I'm thinking of myself sorry!

**Sara Baume:**
No, I said it in an interview, one of the first interviews I did was with Sinead Gleeson from the Irish Times and I think I said in a flippant way I hate writing its so hard you know, and of course this was the bit that became that I'd just…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That was the sound byte.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah, exactly that was the bit that is in the large text in the interview. And then its also like I don't know maybe because its Irish Times its like if you Google me, not that I Google me or anything (laugh) you know it's the thing Sara Baume 'I hate writing' and its like oh no why did I say that. But I do find it, I find it difficult but its, its always, sitting down at the desk part and remaining at the desk and getting to the end of whatever you are trying to think of. I mean the interesting parts of writing are the thinking I suppose and not the actual writing.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure, the creative part.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah actually writing itself is terribly boring, the first draft of something is fine, you are inventing and you are thinking and nothing has to be particularly right because you are just tracing your thoughts. But then all the other stuff and the vast bulk of the work are boring and painful in the same way that I suppose anybody's day job is you know.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I suppose it's good for people know that I mean I think probably people idealise published authors, famous authors they idealise them to a certain extent and think that it just pours out and that's not the case. Its probably good for them to know that. I don't think there's, I don't think we have to say that we enjoy writing. We may enjoy it after its all over. But the process itself can be kind of…

**Sara Baume:**
Yes which begs the question why do it? But its the feeling of satisfaction you get when you reach end of it. Its like I said before its like you know exercise, one hates exercising but one loves the feeling of having exercised. And you know writing is just the same. What surrounds it is what's satisfying or what's interesting, the interesting parts before it happens and then the satisfaction of finishing something, executing something that you are happy with that you feel has fulfilled whatever you were setting out to do. They are the good parts. And then the in-between is (laugh)…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Fair enough, good stuff. Can you tell me what you think what are your strengths as a writer, what do you see as your strengths and what do you see as your weaknesses as a writer. How would you portray your strengths and weaknesses in terms of being a writer?

**Sara Baume:**
It's funny I did an interview with a writer, an America writer quite recently, and she couldn't get over it. She was like imagination you know its retreating into my imaginary world and making stuff up and I said no I'm not really good at imagination. I don't really do imagination (laugh). And I don't which seems weird when I write fiction I suppose but everything I draw from is true or is an extrapolation of truth. You know, I observe and I make notes you know I note down things that I notice or things that seem strange. But very rarely actually make anything up, you know and when I do it, it feels weird and fake. I don't even like naming characters because as soon as you put a fake name on them they feel like a thing.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
They become real.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah, they don't seem real anymore, I mean I have named characters; I do but, so yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Does it help to name them after people you actually know?

**Sara Baume:**
Maybe yeah, yeah or something that, or I suppose with Spill Simmer Falter Wither I used Ray and I kind of had this way, Ray was the name for sunbeams as for wind charts, I described his name as a series of descriptions of other things. And that was almost as a way of making it something other than a name.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Something tangible.

**Sara Baume:**
So you can stamp on his face (laugh).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Fair enough yeah.

**Sara Baume:**
But yeah and I've tried to get around it in other ways but then that can be annoying too, I think when I read stories then that deliberately avoid naming any of the characters you just lose track. So it's a fine balance. But anyway yeah so I don't think I'm good at story line, I don't think I'm good at, I always avoid dialogue.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Do you?

**Sara Baume:**

And this comes definitely from being, from my English background or the very tenuous English background I just always felt that I can't inhabit a voice in a way that an Irish writer could.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Because of the dual kind of…

**Sara Baume:**
I mean you know I've lived here all my life but…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Like you have in your home.

**Sara Baume:**
Yes, yes, I think that. I think the English father sort of diluted that. And whether I can do dialogue or not I can do dialogue when they are people that I know, I suppose talking to each other. But I have to be close enough to the dialogue not to make it sound you know sound made up. It just sounds made up as well when I do it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I can hear it, I can see that.

**Sara Baume:**
What I can do is description, description is about all that I can do (laugh).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Well you do some great description.

**Sara Baume:**
I rely heavily on description and steer clear of various other things. but I think that's part of, that's how we develop a style.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure yeah, yeah I mean you have to play to that strength, you really do. That makes sense.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah trial and error teaches you what your strengths are and then you just stick with it and that way your style develops.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
If you were to say that you took any kind of risk with lets say the Spill Wither what would the risk have been, what would have been the biggest risk for you in doing that?

**Sara Baume:**
Oh well the old man voice I suppose. Because I was told that the first thing I'll get asked is you are a young woman writing an older man. And of course it was and I have done an awful lot of defending of that. So yeah the biggest risk was trying to get inside the head of someone that you aren't for many reasons, which was invention I suppose.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

Do you find it in everything that you write from here on or that you are taking other risks, in other words do you kind of like try to develop yourself through taking these kinds of risks, as you go through your publishing process. You are going to be publishing a lot more now.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah well yes and no, I mean if something seems hard then I think with everything then you want to do it more. I always think of the comedian Tommy Tiernan and how he did this, now he had this brilliant career as a comedian and can do sell-out gigs to probably anywhere in the country and then he, I just remember him, seeing him talk about this particular tour that he did when he went off script I'm sure you are familiar with it. And went out with no jokes made up and just improvised for the hour. And when he was talking about that in the documentary or whatever it was I saw he was saying you know its not, I can do that, I can make jokes and I can make people laugh. But what was hard and as soon as you can do something it's not interesting anymore. Its only interesting if you can['t quite do it and you are trying to do it. And its just the same with writing, you know as soon as you can, as soon as you can do something its not interesting. I think the worst thing I could do as a writer probably any writer can do is hit their stride and go yeah I can write this kind of book in this kind of way and there's a market for it now because my first book has done well and people will take notice of me in the way they weren't going to when I had nothing published. And continue to write that kind of book in that kind of way over and over for an entire career you know that's not…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
So part of your motivation is to challenge yourself.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That keeps you motivated to do more.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah well as soon as I finished Spill Simmer which I never thought would get published in the first place anyway.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Did you not?

**Sara Baume:**
I thought okay that was my practice novel. I got to the end of the novel and now I'm going to write a real novel because that was my practice novel. And I wrote about thirty thousand words I'd say and had very carefully planned the real novel, the second one I suppose and it was fine, there was sort of different plots and then they all coalesced around a body again. and I had it planned out and I was just kind of going through the paces and then I realised that you know whether it was crap or not I don't even know whether it was crap but it wasn't, it just wasn't interesting to me. I thought I've done this, I've written a novel with a story line and things unfold and so I abandoned it. Its the only thing I've ever really abandoned.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Fair enough because I mean…

**Sara Baume:**
It felt too much like writing a book.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Not everything is going to come to completion I would imagine liked sometimes you start things and they just die, before they ever get finished and its okay.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
And is it hard to let go?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, but only because you think of the time…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah you wasted a lot of time.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
But does it not come back in some other form, is there not lessons that come out of that.

**Sara Baume:**
You always tell yourself that (laughing) but yes and no, there's so many notebooks full of things but I'm waiting to recycle and you know I've never looked at them again.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Oh I know how that works, yeah you got a file somewhere. I'll revisit this later.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah and you feel sorry for it, you know its like you don't want it to feel like you are never going to open that drawer again but you are probably never going to open that drawer again.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That's pretty funny I hope you are not talking to it like you know I'm sorry…

**Sara Baume:**
Its okay, I haven't forgotten you (laughing). You just open the drawer every now and again and say I'm coming.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I wanted to ask you about whether you have any kind of a routine like many of the people we have interviewed talked about a writing routine or a writing habit. I don't know if writing is a habit for you or if you have a routine or how you go about it. Do you have a routine? And I know that in one of your interviews you spoke about being a morning writer and you talked about a kitchen table, that you had up against the window that overlooked the sea. And is

that still your writing spot and do you still write in the morning and I'm conscious of the fact that now that you're published you have a different kind of agenda. You are not pursuing publication, publication is pursuing you now.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah and its easier, it's easier because you know when you don't have a book out yet and your aim is to get published of course it is with every writer. You know every day you are like why am I doing this, you know is this the right thing to be doing, everyday you are questioning. Whereas I think all any artist wants is the reassurance that [yes you are good at this, this is what you would do keep doing this.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah, yeah.

**Sara Baume:**
And so it's much easier to write now I don't despair at the desk in the same way as I used to because I feel like at least I know that this is the thing I'm doing. But yes sorry with regard to the kitchen tablet we have moved house and I had to leave the table behind.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Oh bummer. Are you still overlooking the sea?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah this is it, this is a really important thing for me so long as I can maintain it I want to always write in a room where I can see the sea. Its weirdly important. But for years we were in Cork Harbour so the sea view was constantly compromised by cargo ships, I actually liked the cargo ships I had affection for them in the end. But we also had the oil refinery in White Gate so we were looking out at like the storage tanks of that. So it was like a much compromised version of the sea view that I had always dreamed of, (laugh) as in our storage would go out you know like go out over the wall when the tide went out it was just mud flats. So it was not as romantic. But now we are in the, we are West Cork so the sea is the Atlantic which is a completely different view.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure, furious isn't it.

**Sara Baume:**
Yes yeah changes colour every day, every hour. And then quite often just disappears all together because the clouds are so low. So that means a lot to me and yes the table, I have a room how which is just for writing which is a wonderful thing. Whereas before it was always in a room that was used for something else.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
And do you write every day?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah, still, I mean I'm lucky at the moment I can.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Do you take weekends or every day?

**Sara Baume:**
No, every day.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Every morning?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah its not, it's funny because when you don't have a day job you can you know sometimes I have to take a few days off because of other things. I didn't write today you know I was in the van (laugh) and so then I work at the weekend. So there's no sort of, I don't take the weekend off because its the weekend. Then other days force me not to, but em…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Does that get disorienting in terms of time or you don't have a problem with that?

**Sara Baume:**
No, I don't, no, maybe if you had other things in your life that is structured as in you know if I had kids that had to keep a routine, but nothing in my life has to keep any kind of continuity or routine so its fine. But always first thing in the morning my brain would be best in the morning I think.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah some people are morning writers, some people are evening writers and afternoon writers and whatever. But you are a morning writer.

**Sara Baume:**
Yes, definitely morning, I think a lot of people, well I don't know I think most people would be if they could and its circumstances that force it to the small hours. But yeah I mean I save, I also save the nicer things to do later on. Like reading is nicer than writing. So I do that in the evenings, I have to earn it (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah I guess reading, we were talking about your process and part of that process is actually taking in other kinds of information whether it be aesthetic information or actual information or like for instance in one of the interviews you talked about writing about fishing and you actually checked it out with your boyfriend to make sure it was accurate. That's part of that process taking in information but I know that reading is really important to you can you give us a sense of what the role of reading is in your process?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah well I think it should be important to any writer. But I also always feel a bit like I'm catching up, I never studied literature. And I study visual art and that gave me a completely different foundation but there's loads of classics that I haven't read. And I always feel a little bit like I'm afraid of conversations about reading because I'm like ugh maybe someone will mention War and Peace and I'll have to admit that I haven't read it yet.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Oh yeah don't worry about that.

**Sara Baume:**
So I think reading is as important as writing.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Do you get ideas from it, do you get motivation from it, does it make things possible that you didn't realise were possible in your own writing? What does it do for you?

**Sara Baume:**
Yes, I mean I always try and read like broadly as in not just, I know what I like but I try not to just read what I like. Because I feel I don't know how much one does actually learn from reading or use. Some books I feel yeah this is really like changing my ideas and my outlooks on how a book can be approached. but then an awful lot of the time with other books I mean I'm reading at the moment a book by an Israeli writer, and I'm learning just an awful lot about regular life in Tele Aviv or Jerusalem or wherever the stories are set. So I'm not really learning about writing but I'm learning about life, about the world

**Lawrence Cleary:**
And the kind of things that are important in people's lives and so forth, like other people.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah I'm learning about people, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sometimes we think that the world is like our, like our work is like everybody's world. But its not always is it, sometimes you learn that people have a different kind of perspective on things.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah I think it's ferociously important to read from not just your own culture but then it's, I do a lot of reading now from Irish writers and contemporaries because you know you are going to meet them at festivals. So much of the reading that I do feels like homework for maybe a festival or a review that I'm writing or someone that you know I met and I'm curious.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure you want to kind of be familiar with their work before you talk to them.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah or now I get sent books you know publishers will send me books I don't even know if they want me to blurb them or not (laughing) I mean its lovely I get sent free books and I diligently read them and get back, so you know suddenly my reading has been guided from elsewhere. And I don't get to guide it myself as much so maybe I'm not learning what I could have done.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah its kind of fun to follow your own interests isn't it. But I guess its good sometimes to get something out of nowhere as well. I guess both are good to some extent.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah well you never know where it's going to come from. And you know sometimes you can read ten books and forget all of them instantly and then one book…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I know people who read like everything that comes out in the New York Times best sellers list. I mean its so like, that's kind of a hit or miss. If you are going to read them all there's going to be some things that you are kind of like I've no interest in this but I read it because it was in the New York Times best sellers list. And whatever they get out of it they get out of it, you know.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah just having one source to guide your writing it seems.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I'm kind of curious because you do read a lot and one of the things that I noticed when I was reading your book was the incredible vocabulary that you have and I'm assuming that's part of what you get out of reading that you have a closer relationship to words and how they are used and their meaning and so forth. But I'm kind of curious when you are writing in your space, your writers space do you keep dictionaries and thesauruses and resources and things like that around you or are most of them now on the net or how do you?

**Sara Baume:**
I actually try to use less of the longer words than I did at the beginning. Because I think they, in Spill Simmer it kind of portrays it as a first novel in some ways because rather than say what I mean I was using a word that sounded cool. And maybe as I learnt more mature its kind of like no you have to say what you mean and not what, I don't know. Anyway my aim is to write, my aim is to put down on paper the things that I see and the things that I feel in the simplest and best way possible.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
This is Hemmingway?

**Sara Baume:**
This is Hemmingway yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
It's funny because when you started saying this I was thinking Hemmingway too because he is very much about kept it simple.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah and there's times when I think about it and I think no that's, you know using this word that is lovely and poetic and there's a little bit of literation there at the start of the sentence (laughing) is not actually what you meant.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
You have lots of literation in your writing actually it was one of the things I wanted to come back to mostly in terms of when you write, or I guess this is really a question about, I don't know if it's a question about drafting or a question about editing. But there's a lot of attention to sound in your writing, there's a lot of attention almost like poetic attention to sound. And I'm wondering is that part of your initial process, is that an initial goal like when you say something on paper are you trying to make it alliterative or is that something you come back in the editing process or how does that work?

**Sara Baume:**
I can definitely, I mean when I think about the sort of process itself I don't know if I'm that interested in language. I don't know if that's the way of putting it per se. I can always hear the sentence in my head, and its kind of stupid but I can hear how many beats the sentence has.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Fair enough yeah.

**Sara Baume:**
So quite often I will end up adding a two-syllable word.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
So you hear a rhythm.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, because that makes the sentence sound okay. I think all writers do it but maybe just don't explain it in that way. You know you can hear what sounds right and what doesn't but you can't for the life of you explain why one sounds right and one doesn't.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I don't know if everybody hears their sentences in their heads, I think that's something that some people do, this is my experience in the writing centre. There's some people who can't hear it, and there's some people who can, some people can see it and some people can hear it, some people will have some other kind of structural ideal and it has to fit that. And so there's that kind of thing but the fact that you can hear it is really important, in how you know through your editing process.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah it's definitely where the literation and assonance and stuff comes in. Because I want to make it sound beautiful as well in some sense. But then I think I see it as well, I write by conjuring up something in my head or drawing mostly from something I've already seen and then describing it. And so it comes from images and it comes from sound almost more than it does from an interest in words. if I was interested in language I would have been a linguist, whereas I think writing is something else.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
You are actually coming to…

**Sara Baume:**
Sorry did I answer the question (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
No, no that actually is right in line with what I was thinking of, in terms of invention like coming up with ideas and I know in an interview that you did with the PCP alumni you spoke about your feeling of exclusion and isolation when you moved to Cork. When you moved to the countryside in Cork.. And your feeling of being saved by a dog that no one else wanted. And wondering how did you know that that experience would resonate with readers? I guess this is, we all have ideas to me fiction and poetry etc. they are artistic endeavours. So its not

like we are talking about something that we know is important to everybody else but we kind of like think that I feel this really strongly and I think other people will feel this as well. Is that when you know you got an idea that will resonate with your readers.

**Sara Baume:**
You can't say I thought about it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
But what made you pursue it? What made you pursue that, did you just, was it a cathartic thing for you?

**Sara Baume:**
Well yeah, I mean with me it's just what can I sit down with or go back to continually day in day out. What subject matter and at the time I suppose it was the small wordl in front of my face. I was fascinated by the dog sort of easy sense of wonder, the easiness of an animal's life. And how thoughtlessly happy they are, you know, and how that can affect a person. It wasn't a unique topic for a novel but I think its something that you just kind of know innately that this is something that other people will recognise and identify with or would have recognised. But I wasn't thinking this is something people will respond to in writing because of that. I was just thinking what do I think I can get to the end of a novel that, or what can I sit down with and engage with in something everyday that will sustain my own interest quite apart from anyone else's.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Fair enough I guess then the next question is like when in your process does audience become a factor, when do you start thinking about the audience if ever.

**Sara Baume:**
It's a horrible thing to say in front of an audience (laugh). Not so…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Lets be honest because this is about, we are going to learn.

**Sara Baume:**
Well I don't think that thinking about audience makes a good book necessarily. I mean I didn't much think about audience and then when the book was published…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
In Spill Simmer you didn't think about…

**Sara Baume:**
In writing Spill Simmer, yeah and then when the book was published you know you do obviously start thinking about audience and you think who the hell is going to like…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
So it's after everything is done it's gone through the editing process and it's been accepted and its now in paperback or in hard cover that's when you start thinking about the audience?

**Sara Baume:**

Yeah, probably, well you'd think, before that you'd think about getting a publisher but you know editors are completely different audiences.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Do you make changes, based on that kind of desire to get it published?

**Sara Baume:**
I didn't, no and I wouldn't recommend doing so. I mean well it depends what kind of book you want to write there's definitely a very particular kind of book you can write if your aim is to get it published. just you know stick some bondage in there or something (laughing). Fifty shads of grey that's fine if that's your aim and you just want a publisher then…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I just think its interesting because I was reading the interviews and you were talking about the writing that you do for the museum that kind of art, art critiques and things like that and you did talk a lot about audience in terms of that, the patronage, the people who were there to like look at their artwork and then the curator and then the artist themselves and you were trying to satisfy all these different people in that writing. But this is a whole different kind of writing, this is a whole different kind of writing it seems where its almost dangerous to get too worried about the audience.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah well yeah I think so because then, having learnt from experience because then when the book was published I thought you know whose going to identify with this odd little book. I couldn't imagine who would buy it. And then, and now I've learnt from a year on so many people who I never would have expected would have read that kind of book you know people who I didn't even know read books let alone would endure it to the end you know its quite difficult.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
You didn't say that to them, you didn't say you read! (laughing).

**Sara Baume:**
No, no but I did think that and I thought how ignorant of me to have not realised I suppose that people, readers weren't what I had assumed they were at the beginning.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Wow so you learnt a bit about your audience in a way.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah and in the same way this is very pertinent to say to you Lawrence the book has just been published in the US and its doing terrifically well its been reprinted already twice.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Wow cool.

**Sara Baume:**
And I just I'm confounded I'm like Americans! I don't, I really thought Americans won't like this book. Someone said to me English people will like it, English people like dogs. (laughing) I was like okay.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That's funny.

**Sara Baume:**
But Americans, so you don't know readers. Like to write for a reader you are probably going to get it wrong you know people are so complex and diverse.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
So it's mostly just being true to yourself as your own audience in a way.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah I think that's all you can do.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Okay fair enough.

**Sara Baume:**
Unless you are writing the kind of book that you know that is crime fiction and you are aiming it at people who like crime fiction. Its so much more complicated than you think it is.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I've been kind of asking you questions about the situation that you are writing into because we are all, when we write we tend to address things like audience, we tend to address things like what are we going to write about. Who are we going to say it to and like why are we doing it. You know, what do I know about this stuff already that kind of thing. One of the things in terms of you as a writer I thought was really interesting is you were talking to Maeve Mulrennin at the Ulster Man, the Honest Ulster Man and you said that you found it hard to put writer on things. Like forms and bios and things like that, and that kind of resonates I was thinking about Emily Dickenson who spent her whole life writing and never published in her lifetime. And I'm wondering in thinking about something like that how important, I guess how do we regard this idea of being regarded as a writer. is it important that we have to publish before we can regard ourselves as writers or is it something that its okay to say to yourself anyway that you are a writer. Even if you can't put it on a bio or on an application or something like that.

**Sara Baume:**
(laughing) yeah where's the, yeah I would have said I'm not going to say I'm a writer until I have a book published but now that I have a book published I see how lucky I was to get the book published in a way.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
You think you were lucky?

**Sara Baume:**
Well I mean I think, we were talking about my boyfriend earlier on and I was like he's an artist and then I kind of screwed up my face and it was like well he's not really you know he makes stuff but he's not, you wouldn't have heard of him or anything.

**Lawrence Cleary:**

You are marginalising him in a way.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah, and he would never call himself an artist he would be mortified. But to me he makes stuff and so he is. And the same way for all the years that I wrote and nothing got published, I was still doing exactly the same thing as I do now. So you know why not, call yourself.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
It's interesting because we try to convince people every day because the institution is full of people who write for different reasons everyday and it's very difficult to get them to regard themselves as writers as well. Whereas I think probably the kind of writing you do its creative writing, its probably an aspiration to see yourself as a writer. Whereas I think people who are writing for like an article for a publication its partly to become members of communities, the writing itself is not important its becoming a member of the community that seems to be most important, you know what I'm saying. Whereas for you its really the writing, I mean the other part is important too but the writing is at the centre of it.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah, but there are so many different kinds of writing. Yeah I don't get any, now I do put writer on these forms and stuff like that and no one ever goes oh wow that's so interesting. (laughing)…never mind.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I love it, I'm a little bit worried about time here, I want to try to open this up to the floor. I had about four billion questions for you and I'm not going to be able to get to all of them the time is running away from us. What I wanted to try to open it up to the floor so if we could, if there's people who would like to ask questions to Sara about her writing process or how she does what she does, the kinds of things that she does in order to achieve her writing goals I would like for you to maybe bring those forward so that Sara can talk to you about them.

**Question:**
Hi, can I just ask I think in a previous interview you said that you wrote in segments, was that just about the seasons or was it about the entire book and did you know your ending before you started? What was your path to beginning middle and end as it were.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, that's like there was really no beginning middle and end really until the whole thing was more or less together. This was part of I think why the interim novel that I mentioned before the kind of thirty thousand one that got abandoned, why it didn't work because when I was writing Spill Simmer it was very much it came together and I had a couple of different notebooks and I was literally writing it on location. (laugh) 'on location'. I was you know sitting in the car or everything was snippets in notebooks and they were observations either at the seasons or of the dog or of you a sense of something or a feeling or whatever. And so it came together in all of these and then it was a total head wreck to actually pull together into a book. I constantly I remember like I would change some detail at the end and then there would be something at the beginning that, because I hadn't written it in a linear way at all, that getting the chronology of it was actually quite difficult. Even though I had written it season by season it was still, it was still confusing. Anyway at the end of it I was like I'm never going to write a book like that again. The ending as far as I remember kind of involved

there was a point at which I realised that this was what happened at the end. But certainly it wasn't there to begin with nor did it come at the very end of the process either. But at the time I thought I'm never going to write another book like that because it was just so, it was just complicated when it came to pulling it together. And so then when I started writing with the second book it really, I think it gave up on it because it felt too contrived. It was too much like me trying to write a book in a linear way and it was just boring. So then I went back to this other novel that was emerging in exactly the same way through notes and snippets and images and you know the second novel became something, it just seems to be the way I work. I seem to work best…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Can I point something out to you, that when we were looking at all these images that you projected the last time you were here, I mean there's a lot of padding, the calendars, the dogs in a row, the way that everything is arranged, the boys, the windmills, there's arrangements and do you write like that? is that kind of the way you organise things?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah there's an arrangement but it doesn't make any particular sense to anyone else you know. In the same way I suppose a good analogy would be like if you come into my house there's heaps of books everywhere and they are not organised you know alphabetical or you know by country or anything like that. But they are organised, you know, so yeah…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
You have an order.

**Sara Baume:**
I have an order but it's not anybody else's order.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
But is that the way, is that why it was so hard to take something that was chronological and make it work because it was not in an order that other people get and you had to put it into an order that other people would get?

**Sara Baume:**
With the seasons?

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yes.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, it was maybe actually come to think of it a reason why I put that structure on it in the first place. Because it was a way to organise something that I was otherwise having difficulty organising. But yeah there's patterns but no great sense, I mean I wouldn't, its the way that works for me I don't think it would work for everyone at all.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Fair enough, there's another question over here.

**Question:**

Hi Sara, I haven't read your book but I will read it because I've heard very good reviews about it today especially, because everybody that told me they read the book said it was so different, that's the word they used, and beautifully written and do you feel under pressure now to have to come up with something very, because its not very often that someone does come up with a book that's so different and that's probably you know what has made your book so good. But do you feel under pressure now to write different all the time?

**Sara Baume:**
There's always a pressure with the tricky second novel. Because quite often it does badly if the first one has done well, touch wood (laughing), but I do, like I'm never going to sit down at a desk and say okay I'm writing a book or I'm writing a story. They either emerge in their own way or they don't and I mean the book that will become my second novel had more or less, it existed before the first one was ever published, had ever done well or before anyone had ever said it was different or said anything at all about it. And I think that's probably a good thing it was kind of, it was driven by the same kind of despair, it was sort of already there, it existed before.

**Question:**
And would it be similar or would it be?

**Sara Baume:**
You know its funny in my head its completely different but its like I have a sister and I always say I look nothing like my sister and then everyone goes you are the image of each other. So you know there's a likeness there that is impossible to avoid.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
It's kind of interesting because Ronald, he's way in the back there, he's like hiding and you had a similar situation where you had two books on the go, you had one and then you started another one and then the second one is the one that got published before the first one.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah the thing about December preceded…

**Ronald:**
…the same situation (difficult to hear speaker)…

**Question:**
Can I just ask you Sara had you a favourite novelist or authors and what was your favourite book ever?

**Sara Baume:**
Well its funny when I said it was different I'm kind of thinking I don't think it was that different, I suppose I think I was, recently I've read a lot more of weird little European novels I call them (laughing). And I think to me Spill Simmer is more in that kind of tradition. I love a book called 'The Faster I Walk the Smaller I Am' by a Norwegian writer called Kjersti Skomsvold. More recently I've read 'A Meal in Winter' by Hubert Mingarelli, 'The Muscle Feast' which is by some German writer's name I can't remember. Its just some really odd little books that get away with it, and are quite different but I think that maybe Spill Simmer is more similar to than those. A book I always mention is 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy, which I read years and years ago but it was just a really important book to me

because it was the point at which I realised that you could play with language, you could break all the rules of an art form and still tell a wonderful story and just be a really captivating read. So yeah that's, I always liked Jadie Salinger as well although re-reading it recently I'm like this is completely you know I don't know why I like it so much. its something about the disillusion, the disaffection of it. And nothing to do with the style.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
There's kind of an…

**Sara Baume:**
Yes, yeah there's something at the heart of it, even though on the surface its nothing like something I'd normally like.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
He was an isolationist as well. He as right up there in New Hampshire, I never saw him.

**Sara Baume:**
(laughing) only recently in 2008 he died.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah he just died recently, his kids are still up there I think.

**Question:**
Hi, I want to say at the outset that I loved the book, I did find it very dark and a bit unsettling. As I was reading it I kept telling myself there was going to be redemption. I just wanted to ask you was Ray's fate sealed from the very beginning or was there a point in the book where it could have been a different outcome?

**Sara Baume:**
(laughing)

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Kind of a good question.

**Sara Baume:**
Sorry to anyone who hasn't read the book, like I think the ending is a little open ended. What's interesting is that people have said to me what actually happened at the end. Whereas other people know precisely what happened at the end.

**Question:**
Or maybe we think we know.

**Sara Baume:**
Well to be honest I knew precisely what happened at the end, it was only after people started voicing their doubts that I was like how interesting that it might, you know, I think fiction is so subjective both reading and writing it and so in many ways I love that people can create their own ending if that's what they want. I couldn't, I've had people say to me I can't, you have to tell me beforehand whether the dog dies before I buy the book or not. (laughing) they really just couldn't bear to buy it if the dog died. And I never wanted to do the obvious thing with it I suppose is the most subtle way of answering that.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
But did you know from the beginning that this was going to be the outcome at the end or was this something like Joseph talked about having to know the end before he could actually start writing the book.

**Sara Baume:**
Well what I knew was and to me what the ending stands for is that my revelation was the dog doesn't give a shit. And that's what I wanted to portray that this animal is just an animal and everything that the man thinks of it or everything that he goes through he's projecting on the animal. That the animal is, I suppose it was my own revelation I think. I love the dog and the dog loves me but you know if anything happened to me he would forget me in a couple of weeks, my mum would take him in.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
We took the dog to the kennel and I swear to god he was like 'who are you?' When I came back.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah they are just you know they are little parasites, they want your food and they want (laughing) and that's life, that's reality. So I think that was the revelation I suppose that I wanted.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That's interesting.

**Sara Baume:**
That everything that went on was in his head or whatever.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
And you knew that was going to happen from the beginning or is that something that emerged as you were writing.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, well yeah I wanted to enforce that in some way. I guess the details that emerged from the other things that happened or you know.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Cool, good question.

**Question:**
The other question is this, when you sit down to write and you have an idea in your head what you are going to write do you sometimes surprise yourself at the end of the writing at what you have written or do you always write what you wanted to write when you sat down.

**Sara Baume:**
That's a good question, you actually rarely I think end up writing what you think you are going to write when you sit down. I never sit down and say okay I'm going to write now with nothing in my head. You know I will always sit down with an idea of what I want to say. And I never think of anything I want to say, usually before I get to the desk but then

when  are writing it usually evolves. It takes on its own life in some way.  I think so long as you sit down with something in your head then it will grow from that and quite often yeah you will surprise yourself, it will end up not being at all what you set out to write.  But I think sitting down and saying okay write, I have to write something that never works you know. There has to be a drip feed in some sense.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Yeah there's probably some kind of ritual that you go through before you get going. Where you psyche yourself into it and things like that.

**Sara Baume:**
No, well I walk the dogs every morning and I think I need that time you know I'm always alone.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
It's like a processing time.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, you kind of let things sit or you set out what you are doing that day.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Again going back to the last time you were here you were talking about the little model dogs, were they clay or?

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Clay, and there's Saramore here talks about advancing and retreating and like advancing is when you are on it and just putting it down on paper and retreating is when you need to step back a little bit and think and process and then maybe come back and process what you've written that kind of thing. So those dogs, those little models are actually you retreating and processing, I know some people do it in their sleep, some people clean, I know Edith talks about cleaning when she's on the…

**Sara Baume:**
I wish I cleaned that would be so useful (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That's interesting though.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah but it is, its doing something that's mechanical.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
But it's a process that's going on there's a lot of intellectual stuff going on as well there's a lot of cognitive processing going on at the same time when you are retreating.  I'm sure its not just like now I'll think about I don't know clouds and bunnies and that kind of thing you are actually…

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah you are not just going hm, hm, hm, (laughing) I like to think that god so many of my thoughts are incredibly trivial you know, in the same way, I'll be walking in the morning I'll be thinking you know think of something, try to remember that quote and learn it off but you end up inevitably thinking oh what will I have for breakfast or what will I need to get at the supermarket. (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Do I have enough for the dog, can I share?

**Sara Baume:**
I remember in arts school talking to one of my fellow students and she was like I think about, I just think about the project constantly that's all I think about in everything I'm doing. I remember feeling really inadequate because I was like god I really don't, I just think about trivial stuff most of the time (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I have to ask you as part of your process we talked in our last talk and when I was doing my dissertation for my masters I can't think, I had countless hours talking to the dog not writing and reading it but talking to the dog trying to explain to the dog what I was doing right. And the dog being very disciplined and sitting there and kind of like waiting for me to get over it so I could give him the treat but do you ever use the dog as part of your process? Do you bring them into your process. I know they could become subjects in your writing but do they ever become part of your process like do you talk to them or do you bounce ideas off them or ask their opinion.

**Sara Baume:**
There's a sketch in the Simpsons I always think of when I think they are talking, you can hear what the dog is hearing and you know its just total gobble-de-gook its bla, bla, blab and then there's one word they know but its just the dog listening to and then they say biscuit. And they just go bla-bla-blab and then biscuit (laughing). But I did more so with Spill Simmer, I talked it more to the dog and less so now but I do think that the walking is part of it. You know other forms of exercise is distracting in a way that maybe walking isn't. and with dogs you have to walk and you have to walk sort of ponderously because they have to sniff things and do whatever. And I do, that's kind of my downtime I suppose. So they come into my process in that way. I always say I'll never have kids because they just take up, I imagine now I obviously don't have kids, but they take up so much of your mental space in a way that a dog doesn't. their needs are so simple. You know, I don't think about them in the way that I think I would have to… (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure, I found when reading, when I was talking to the dog basically what I was trying to do was like can I say something cogent does it make sense. A lot of times it didn't because I really didn't understand what I was trying to say yet and I could try it on my wife but she would tell me a) shut up I'm trying to watch the soap, or she'd try to comment on it where I didn't want feedback I just wanted to see if I could say it. And the dog didn't give me any grief you know.

**Sara Baume:**

Well I do that, I do that with the boyfriend probably more and then he tries to give me feedback and I'm like no, no (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
No I just wanted to test it out, I'm the judge here yeah, yeah.

**Sara Baume:**
I just want you to listen I don't want you to…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Are there other questions?

**Question:**
Sara id like to ask you how did the MA in creative writing influence or not as the case may be influence your writing.

**Sara Baume:**
In retrospect I do think it was incredibly useful to have a group of people around me who were doing the same thing as me. And I'm slightly sorry when I did the creative writing Masters in Trinity there were only two in the country there was UCD and there was Trinity and they were, we were with, our workshops were with poets. I would have liked to have done a prose Masters specifically. Or maybe it was a good thing in retrospect but the main thing I got out of it was just being in a group of people who were doing the same thing and reading their work probably knowing what your peers were doing was really useful at the time. Learning from their mistakes as well as learning from your own mistakes. And I mean we had great teachers but what I remember mostly was you know the peer thing which otherwise you are just writing in isolation. I don't know that you couldn't, that you couldn't get that from a writing group in the same way. But…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I was asked that exact same question myself and it was one of the things I was wondering is did you get things like a better understanding of like the components of a novel or the components of a short story in other words the features in like did it make you focus on things that you never would have thought about like did it give names to parts of…you know what I mean.

**Sara Baume:**
It did, but I don't know that I used that knowledge, it took me five years then to actually get a book, id be ferociously embarrassed to show you anything I wrote while I was on the Masters. I thought it was crap. Or no I mean at the time it was me learning as quickly as possible, but it was those kinds of five years of being left to my own devices I think and learning and probably using what I learnt but processing it in my own way. Not trying to write in a way I thought I was supposed to write but I suppose developing my own voice was what actually got the book out. But I do, it was really useful. I also learnt a lot about how writing works, how the industry works I suppose. We had Jonathan Williams whose an agent or was an agent and he gave us this workshop called The Market Place and something, something which sounded quite boring but was actually the mechanics of how publishing works. And that became useful when it came to even just writing a cover note. So I stand over, I do think they are a great thing. I learnt a lot but its how you use what you learn as well.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Are you in an MA program, are you in the program here? Are you in UL's program (yeah) oh good stuff. So how do you feel, is it helping you, (love it) you love it, good (laughing).

**Sara Baume:**
It's also an excuse I found as well it's an excuse just to focus on writing, whereas it's much harder to make time for something that you are not you know you are never going to have to submit anything for. So just as a creation of space it was great.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Did you hear that Donal, she loves it, she loves it. (laughing). We got a plug in on that, are there some other questions? We don't have much time left, we can take one question two questions tops.

**Question:**
Its not a question about writing I was just wondering do you know are here any plans to have the book turned into an audio book? And if so because it is so sound would you have anybody in your head that you'd like to read it?

**Sara Baume:**
That's funny, an actor called Andrew Bennett did it for the book on one. And just extracts and I thought he read it very well but I couldn't listen to it because it was, it was like the character had come to life and he read it very well but he didn't read it with the rhythm I had in my head. I suddenly realised that no one else is going to read it like that either, you are the only person who can hear this. (laughing) so it was just weird. The Americans have made it into an audio book and I'm not listening to that either because I suspect its an American accent. (laughing).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure that would be worse!

**Sara Baume:**
Well I don't know, I don't know. I got like this is how you can buy your own audio book which I didn't and I got the blurb of the writer, or the actors bio and I think he was maybe Irish American or some kind of a background in New York theatre and I left it at that. I was like (laughing) so id be interested if someone else wanted to listen to it.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Its interesting that you say they didn't have the rhythm because its like one of the things you'd do in poetry class is you'd scan a poem and try to figure out its rhythm. And you would scan it and say here's the heavy beats and here's the lighter beats and this is the rhythm. I remember doing it with Seamus Heaney and I didn't even know some of those words rhymed until I heard him read it. Because he had that northern Ireland kind of accent and you know to me those don't rhyme but when he said it they sure did so its interesting like how, how subjective the whole rhythmic kind of thing is.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah and you have to let go.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
It plays a big part, yeah.

**Sara Baume:**
Yes, so I'm a bit afraid of the audio books for that reason.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
We have one more, is there somebody else?

**Question:**
Sorry can I just ask another one? Its just back to the character, the method of putting yourself into the character of a man first of all and into the mind of somebody that thinks differently to yourself. How far into, how much did he take over your mind as it were to get the detail that you did get.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah you see that's interesting because he wasn't someone who thought differently to me, his thoughts were my thoughts and what was different was his gender and his sex, or sorry his gender and his age. You know essentially I mean that was how I feel I got away with it you know and at his essence the way he perceived things, the things he was interested in. And the way his mind worked was all coming from me. So again it wasn't so much of a reach, I don't have a great imagination again. But yeah you do, I don't know its funny now he feels, I finished this book in 2013 so I feel like he's someone else now. But at the time he was very much me. But yeah, I mean that maybe answers the question in a way you hadn't expected.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Can I ask one question before we have to finish. Your mum you talk a lot about your mum in all of the things that I've read and I'm just kind of, I guess I wanted to ask what role she plays. Is she first reader? And what are some of the other roles she plays in your process, when you go through this writing do you bounce ideas off her, do you ask for some kind of comfort from her. In other words bolstering your emotions so you feel better, that kind of thing. How do you bring your mother into this process?

**Sara Baume:**
My mother always read everything first, and even though I don't need her to now as in I have a bunch of editors I still as almost suspiciously I'll send it to my mother first.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Just to get that (laugh).

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah just to get that, and she's just she writes well but she's not, she's an archaeologist so she's not you know her background isn't in any way writing. Even though I guess it's a different kind of writing she would do you know a lot of archaeologists reports and so it's a technical kind of writing. But she hasn't done that for some time. But yeah I think she's also a harsh critic, your mother more than anyone can see through you you know. So when its not authentic then she knows whereas someone who doesn't know me at all will read my work differently. And my mother would be completely honest you know always the harshest critic. But she reads an awful lot of books and she's also someone I guess who is just a great

reader and so is more like an ordinary person. More like a regular audience whereas editors and industry and agent you know will tell you they are a slightly different audience.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure and they have their own agendas.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
You trust your mum:

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, absolutely I still.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
That's probably why it's such a special relationship.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah I still as I say even though I don't need to anymore everything goes through her first.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Sure that's great.

**Sara Baume:**
Just out of suspicion but I mean so much of my mum, I think of her as the artist much more than I am. Because I feel that I've worked at it whereas my mother just has this amazing perception for things. She said to me one day have you noticed how like all the different leaves make different noises in the wind, according to their shape and you know this would just be a regular observation but she notices these things. More than anything she's taught me how to notice these small things. Had she recorded them shed be the writer, but it was what I learnt from her much more so than the roles…

**Lawrence Cleary:**
Real appreciation for just living, existing.

**Sara Baume:**
Yeah, yeah, the small wonders. Same way as an animal does.

**Lawrence Cleary:**
We are going to stop there I'm afraid we are out of time. Before I do I just want to, there's something for Sara thank you. Wed normally get you something like a voucher for a restaurant or something but you live a billion miles away so we got you a few other things just to say thank you. Thank you for this interview. (applause) thank you also for all that you've done this year with us, you have been here many times and you've given us a lot of your time, and we just wanted to say thank you.

**Sara Baume:**
Oh Limerick has been so good to me. Thank you. (applause).

**Lawrence Cleary:**
I guess there's a few, I should say also that we'll do this again next year with somebody different, we are not sure who that is yet but hopefully we'll see all of you again next year. I don't know if there's any coffee coming…

**End**